

Memories of a school tragedy, 50 years later

by Rita DeMontis
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Fifty years ago, October 14 fell on a Tuesday, the day after Thanksgiving.

On that day, a junior high school in Toronto's west end would suffer a tragedy that continues to haunt many from its student body to this day. Oakdale Junior High on Grandravine Dr. (now known as Oakdale Park Middle School), was the scene of a drunk-driving incident when a driver violently mounted the curb of the sidewalk and rammed her car into a group of students.

How do I know? It was my junior high.

The girl who was critically injured had been my classmate since Grade 4. The two young boys killed were connected through family members. And the girl who ran them over was barely 22 years old when, according to the Toronto Telegram, she was charged with criminal negligence causing death and impaired driving.

The two boys were barely in their teens – Claudio Palermo was only 12 while his friend Pat Marzilli was 13. Gudrun Wilck was 14, and eyewitness accounts show both boys were heroes that day: word is Claudio had quickly shoved Wilck out of the way before the car came barreling down upon them, while Pat valiantly pushed another young boy, their friend Joe D'alessandro (confirmed by Joe's brother) just in the nick of time to safety. Joe was saved but suffered a shoulder injury.

At the end of the day, two young, beautiful lives were snuffed out as police reports state the boys were rammed through a heavy fence before finally coming to a stop.

Fifty years is a long time to carry the memories of a childhood tragedy, but every time I run into an old school friend, the conversation would start with "do you remember the accident at Oakdale?" We have all remembered. Our childhood was scarred in a macabre and obscene way by children tragically losing their lives in plain sight.

These are the scars a drunk driver leaves behind.

And every Thanksgiving I always remember the details: School's out, kids streaming through the doors, no one really noticing the car until it's too late. There are those who will tell you the noise directly after the accident was deafening, others recall the silence. There was hysteria, the kids were quiet. It happened in slow motion, it happened too quickly for a young mind to truly absorb, except in the end, seeing two young bodies lying crumbled and broken, violently embedded in the wet mud.



"They were walking right in front of me," says Irene Buckley, 14 at the time, and a classmate for many years. "We came out of the school, and the day was beautiful and sunny. I remember this car came right up next to me – I thought it was odd – and I saw Gudrun get picked up and bounced on the hood. Once the car stopped, we saw the boys lying on top of each other."

Another classmate, Susan, saw the scene from the school's steps and saw the gym teacher, Mr. Bartlett, spring into action. "I followed him, and I saw him take off his belt to tie around one of the boy's legs. But there was so much blood. I tried to stem some of the bleeding with my hands ... I walked back into the school and washed my hands. I walked home in a daze."

Irene remembers the school nurse, Mrs. MacKenzie (whose husband taught math), rushing out with two blankets to cover the boys. "But I knew they were dead." Irene's recollections are as clear as the day the event happened. "The car was so close we could have reached out to touch it. And the driver, I saw her face up close as she mounted the curb ... relaxed, with no real expression."

The next day, I walked up to the flattened fence and to my horror saw dried blood along the top. The principal made a brief announcement, but in those days, there was no such thing as grief counselling. Later that morning, my French teacher stood and wept — Claudio had come to her right before the bell rang to ask for some assistance. She was in a rush and told him to come back another time. "If only I had held him a few moments," she sobbed. It was unsettling watching a teacher lose herself in her own guilt.

Years later a group of Oakdale alumni came together to share notes — and the reality was, we had no idea we had suffered post-traumatic stress. For me and my classmates — Irene, Cynthia and Marilyn, Paul and Susan, and Laura and Wanda — that fence was a terrible symbol of the fragility of life, and how we had all been forced to look at our own mortality at such a young age.



Rumour had it the boys had been buried near each other. I was always curious about this, wondering if I could find my own comfort in the knowledge that these two friends who had been close in life were also close in death.

After years and years of searching, several weeks ago I finally found them ... resting together side by side. Fresh flowers were on their graves. They were loved and continue to be loved.

Ironically, the young woman who killed them died ten years ago and rests in the same cemetery.

Why am I writing this piece? It's a cautionary tale, to be honest. We are headed into the holiday season, and yes, we know people will drink and drive. We need to find the courage to stop them, be they casual friends or beloved family members.

Because drunk driving is a terrible legacy to leave behind.



According to MADD.ca, crashes involving alcohol and/or drugs are a leading criminal cause of death in Canada. Every day, on average, up to four Canadians are killed in an alcohol and/or drug-related motor vehicle crash and hundreds more are injured.

Approximately 65,000 Canadians are impacted by impaired drivers annually.